

Building a Digital Branch

Web 2.0 positions librarians to deliver fully functional library branches on the web

by David Lee King

Library websites have been around for about 15 years. The list of what has changed in the past 15 years could fill a library. Programming languages have changed. Web browsers have changed. Internet connections have gotten faster, and websites have come to serve a wider variety of functions.

Interaction has also changed.

Many library websites, both visually and structurally, were built last century. Their model was

based on what is now a dated, almost "traditional" structural and visual model of web design. Those older websites focused on providing information about the library rather than on providing actual online services. There wasn't a lot of interaction on the average website in the '90s. In fact, most of the tools we currently use to interact online were not yet available.

With 21st-century technology, libraries are in a position to deliver a fully functional library branch—a digital branch—on the web. When I talk about digital branches, I like to remind people that the "digital" part is somewhat arbitrary. A branch is a branch, whether it is physical or virtual, and must always have certain properties. A digital branch is a branch library, delivered digitally,

on the web. It offers much more than a traditional library website in many ways, because a digital branch has real staff, a real building, a real collection, and a real community happening on and around it.

With a digital branch, you give patrons a choice about how they interact with you. For instance, they can go to the library by simply visiting

your website. Or, through tools such as RSS or outpost sites such as Facebook, they can have the library come to them. A traditional library model

really can't duplicate that experience.

Once you've decided to build a digital branch, the first step in the process is to gather information through discussions with three crucial groups of people—the library leaders (administration and/or board of trustees), the library staff, and, of course, the patrons. It's necessary to carefully document who the branch will be serving, what services those people desire, and what you are capable of providing with your budget and technological capability.

Before you actually build your site, take the information you've gathered and carefully plan your actions. You'll need to ask some important questions: Who will be in charge of the process? How will staff time be allocated for the work that

needs to be done? What content will you have within your digital branch? What formats will you use?

Once you've thoroughly planned your digital branch and are ready to start building it, you'll need to select the tools you'll be using. You'll need to pick a Content Management System for your digital branch. The CMS is the control center of the site. It allows you to administer content within the branch: how it is organized, displayed, and accessed; who can access it; and how it can be accessed.

Of course, you'll need to design the site itself. Before jumping in, you should sketch, design, and build a prototype to show to staff and patrons. The aesthetics of a website are extremely important to end users, so you want to make sure potential users like the appearance before you implement your design.

If I were to sum this process up in one sentence, it would be this: think, plan, and do. First, think about what you want to achieve with your website. Then do a lot of planning to meet those goals you dreamed up. And finally, do it—build the site you planned!

Once your site is built, you are not finished with your work by any means. A thriving digital branch requires constant work, updates, and change. ■



A digital branch has a real staff, a real building, a real collection, and a real community happening around it.

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